



EXECUTIVE COMPUTING

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Tap opinions before making system plunge

Most people have very short memories.

That seems to be especially true for those who have set up a small computer system. Talk to them six months after the equipment and software is in place, and most are happy, productive and glad they did it — completely forgetful of the incredible headaches they probably went through. Except for one or two unlucky staffers who were closest to the process, the battle scars are minimal.

That doesn't make it any less painful for someone about to go through an installation, though. So, in the interests of avoiding needless frustration, here's a case history of the problems actually encountered by one businessman as he tried to adopt a new computer system.

Our executive, who I'll call Al, is a senior financial officer who listened for years and years to the virtues of spreadsheet programs for business planning. About a year ago, he decided to take the plunge.

For advice on the right computer and software, Al sought out friends, business associates and sales people at local computer stores. Not surprisingly, much of the advice was contradictory. He heard a lot about the IBM-PC and the Lotus 1-2-3 and Multiplan software programs. But what really caught Al's eye was a demonstration of LisaCalc running on Apple's Lisa 2/5.

It appeared there was nothing the program and computer couldn't do. The LisaCalc program was very, very easy to use, and the price was right — although Al didn't know this was because the Apple dealer was ridding himself of his last units so he could emphasize the new, lower-cost Apple Macintosh instead.

Shortly after taking delivery of the machine, Al was up and running. In only a few hours of self-instruction, our friend was already using it for simple tasks. After a few weeks, he could

calculate the month-to-month cash flow of the business and play "what-if" games with various investment strategies. His spreadsheet model had about 20 columns and 80 rows — small, as models go, but already it was beginning to pay for itself.

Disaster ahead

But disaster loomed. As Al got more and more proficient with the spreadsheet, the number of calculations he put in it naturally began to grow, and he became more and more dependent on it.

At about 50 columns and 200 rows — still just medium size — performance began to deteriorate. Even when the program wasn't recalculating, the cursor seemed to stall for up to 30 seconds on the screen after an entry was made. (One reason for this is that unlike the IBM-PC's screen, which is character oriented, the Apple Lisa and Macintosh screens are "bit-mapped" and require much more memory and computer time to process each character. This, apparently, causes the entire system to slow down as spreadsheets grow in size.)

The delays caused concern, but not having experience with other spreadsheet programs, Al thought this was normal. Then came the fateful day when Al — while preparing for a crucial management meeting — added some columns of new data and tried to recalculate the model. The system first stalled, then crashed entirely. Al, being a conscientious sort, had saved the file before recalculating, so he rebooted the system. With relief, he spotted the file, but instead of popping back up on the screen, the computer flashed him an error message, implying the model was too large for its memory.

I won't get into all of the gruesome efforts it took to restore the file. Suffice to say that along the way, Al learned the following: a bug existed in the Lisa 7/7 operating system, Version 3.0, requiring him to obtain another version of the software — pre-release Version 3.1 — just to open the file, and once the file was finally open, it was too slow to use.

In other words, just when the spreadsheet grew large enough to be really valuable, it stopped working. Merely to put a new value into a single cell of the spreadsheet took more than a minute of waiting. Al was forced to start doing the calculations by hand — indeed, it was the manual spreadsheet that saved the day at the management meeting. Needless to say, LisaCalc was abandoned in disgust.

Lessons to be learned

In retrospect, Al's biggest mistake was simply not seeking enough feedback from other experienced users of LisaCalc before plunking his money down. The problems he experienced with the program and the Lisa operating system were well known among people in the industry.

(A postscript: Last January, Apple dropped LisaCalc and 7/7, and in April, ceased production of Lisa entirely.)

It sometimes hurts the ego to admit it, but our business needs are rarely unique. More than anything else, the lesson to be learned from stories like this is to resist the temptation to blaze a new trail — you should share knowledge and tap the opinions of other users.

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